

Aruba and the European Union join in an historic project

Tuesday afternoon was witness to the commencement of an “historic” cooperation between the European Union and a number of agencies in Aruba, and that is in the most literal sense of the word. On the Schelpstratt in Oranjestad was gathered at sunset a number of individuals that have persisted for five years to see the renovation of four landmark buildings known as the “Ecury Complex,” which upon completion in two years will be home to the National Museum of Aruba.

The museum is now open as the Archeological Museum in temporary quarters at the Instituto di Cultura, which cannot do justice to the beautiful and extensive collection of artifacts in their possession. The new structure will completely reveal the history and prehistory of Aruba’s ancient cultures. It has been the dream and determination of several people, including Arminda Ruiz, Museum Curator, and Yvonne Webb-Kock of the Monuments office to see the realization of this project.

Minister of Culture, the Honorable Ramon Lee felt such emotion for the commencement of this project that he expressed his gratitude to the efforts of those that worked so hard in both Papiamentu and English. The English was in consideration to the island’s honored guest, His Excellency, Mr. Per Eklund, Ambassador of the European Union and Authorizing Officer of the European Development Fund (EDF). It is their 4.3 million dollar contribution to this project that has made it possible. The Aruban Government and UNOCA, the Aruba foundation that encourages and finances cultural projects, have provided the additional funds needed for completion.

When opened in 2008, the museum will consist of the four landmark buildings and three new structures, which will house the major portion of the exhibits. Arminda Ruiz stated that it would be a “very interactive, hands-on, learning experience,” as visitors will be immersed in the ancient history and culture of Aruba.

A small, symbolic ceremony choreographed by Freddy Montoya accompanied the opening speeches, narrated by Ruben Trappenberg. It told the story of the first Dutch archeologist to take a sincere interest in Aruba’s ancient history, Egbert Boerstra, a “pioneer” of the archeological digs on Aruba. According to the narrative, Boerstra established himself in Aruba because in his own words, “Aruba is the most archaeologically rich island of all.” The program recounted how the original Archeological Museum was first established in 1981 under the auspices of a young and energetic Minister of Culture named Nel Oduber, and it was one of the first such museums in the region. This prompted more native islanders to answer the siren’s song of archeology and eventually establish the many digs on Aruba that are still producing a rich collection of artifacts. Igancio Wernet, with his brother Angel and Francisco Croes swelled the staff of the fledgling museum.

In 1989, Evelino Fingal, graphic designer and visionary, ‘drafted the first project proposal for the acquisition of the historically value Ecury Complex.’ When Marlene van Blarcum joined the museum staff, it attracted thousands of young students to the museum, including its present curator Arminda Ruiz.

In 1993, the European Development Fund took an interest in the museum and pledged the finance the lion’s share of a proper home for Aruba’s history. The government purchased the complex four years later from the existing Ecury family, who proudly attended Tuesday’s ceremonies. One reason in particular that it is such a source of pride for them is that the museum will be housed in the home where Aruba’s great WWII hero, “Boy Ecury” was born. Boy was active in the Dutch Underground fighting the Nazis, and lost his life before a firing squad at the age of twenty-two. He is an important part of the island’s history, and it is only fitting that his birth place will house the Aruba’s National Museum.

In lieu of a “groundbreaking,” an informal ceremony conducted by Freddy Montoya and three representatives of the next generation of Aruban places hard hats upon the individuals that symbolize the agencies responsible for the realization of this project. Per Eklund, Maria Dijkhof-Pita, Deputy of UNOCA, and Minister Lee accepted the honor from Stacy-Ann, Cindy and Thiala, regular and enthusiastic visitors to the existing museum. Their continuing interest in Aruba’s history will see that the island’s heritage is not lost.

In his address to the gathering, Ambassador Eklund stated that island visitors come to Aruba for “Sun, Sand and Sea, and now Aruba can add a fourth “S” to its more obvious virtues, and that is “Soul.” He expressed how gratified he was in being a part of this project, and later, in private, how “delightful” he found the uniquely characteristic opening ceremony. It ended with a physically and figuratively huge “Danki,” or “thank you” to the many friends and institutions that made this project possible, it likely would never have been realized without their continued support and persistence.